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ABSTRACT

The 1992 Hope College (Michigan) Interpersonal Communications Seminar provided a basis from which participants could examine the scope of interpersonal communication as a "practical discipline." Discussions focused on the constructivist perspective wherein persons approach the world through interpersonal processes which then channel their behavior in various ways. A second theme considered the ability of communication teachers to empower students to communicate ethically and for the common good. Knowledge gained at the seminar provided a helpful interaction framework for a basic course in interpersonal communication, with an emphasis on messages, and the social construction of relationships and their competent accomplishment. Faculty development experiences such as the Hope Conference help communication teachers make good choices about how to manage the "knowledge explosion" as well as develop frameworks to enhance understanding and develop competent practices. Contains 19 references. (NH)

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Reframing an Interpersonal Communication Course:

Influences of the Hope Conference Seminar

Paper Presented At

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Introduction

This paper is a personal reflection on some of my experiences as a participant at the Hope College Institute for Faculty Development: Conference on Communication Theory and Research July 26-August 1, 1992, in Holland, Michigan. The Institute planners describe the premise of the conference in this way:

> Our programs and our courses will be stronger if those of us who plan and teach in them are more aware of current research and theory and understand better the underlying theoretical and philosophical issues and assumptions.

In this paper, I will attempt to present a bit of the flavor of this unique and invigorating professional development experience, and to show how I used some of what I learned the following fall in my interpersonal communication class.

A review of current literature on interpersonal communication demonstrates the rapid growth of information that has occurred around this communication context. Those of us who teach the undergraduate introductory interpersonal communication course attempt to identify ways to create coherence for students who are usually experiencing these theories, variables and processes for the first time. It was precisely this challenge that took me to the 1992 Hope College Institute and specifically to the Interpersonal Communication Seminar, led by Professor James Applegate. It was my goal to use the seminar both to study current perspectives in interpersonal communication and to develop a clearer and more meaningful framework for my introductory-level interpersonal communication course. Specifically, I was interested in helping students more effectively use course information both for theoretical understanding and for personal competence. I was to discover what I was looking for as the Interpersonal Communication Seminar unfolded.

"The Turn to Messages": Overview of the Interpersonal Communication Seminar

This seminar initially helped us examine the scope of interpersonal communication as a "practical discipline." This was not to be confused with communication as an "applied discipline," but rather communication was conceived as a means to construct social reality; a set of practices to respond to problems by constituting them and then proceeding to their solution. With an emphasis on messages, this approach proceeds to the social construction of relationships and to their competent accomplishment. Through praxis, then, one develops a vision for the possibilities of communication in one's life.

We spent time reading and discussing the theoretical perspectives of Delia (1987), Craig (1986 and 1989), O'Keefe, Delia and O'Keefe (1980), Clark and Delia (1979), Hewitt (1984), Parker (1989) and O'Keefe (1988). We considered ethnomethodological approaches such as those described by Brown and Levinson (1979), Meehan and Wood (1975), and O'Keefe (1979). We explored some of the earlier work on interpersonal persuasion, including Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953), and Miller, Boster, Roloff and Siedbold (1987). We studied the competence work of Spitzberg and Cupbach (1989), Pearson and Daniels (1988), and Pavitt and Haight (1986). Never far from any of our discussions were Goffman and Habermas.

We studied communication ideals, communicative competence as defined by the theoretical analysts, the cultural ethnographers, and the outcomes-orientation of the self; communicative identities as mediated by the emergent definition of the self, the other, the setting, our relationship, motives, goals and tasks. We spent considerable time on the individual in interpersonal contexts, examining topics such as goals in discourse, individual differences in reasoning about communication, and processes of interpersonal persuasion. Finally, we examined conversation/discourse as an interpersonal research focus.

Professor Applegate framed our discussions by first suggesting that when we teach communication, we are presenting an orientation to social life. The constructivist

perspective suggests that persons approach the world through interpretation processes which then channel their behaviors in various ways.

A second theme that our seminar leader displayed no small amount of passion about was our ability as communication teachers to empower students to communicate ethically and for the common good. Applegate contrasted this way of teaching with other, sometimes more frequently-used approaches: for example, teaching communication as a transmission device, a packaging device, or a game. He challenged us to consider helping students to come to understand communication as a practical discipline that allows us to construct our social reality through its very process (an idea in itself empowering), and therefore one that suggests the element of choice: if we create our social reality, then we have the freedom to also create one which is positive. A constructivist perspective, then, can help students to develop a vision for the possibilities of communication in their lives.

The Frame Begins to Create Itself: The Social Construction of Reality

Throughout these stimulating discussions, as we attempted to come to grips with issues ranging from what are the hegemonic forces on this approach to the discipline to why events and objects can be considered the results of constructions we apply, I noted that several words and phrases were regularly appearing in my notes:

- interpretive
- outcomes
- patterns of interaction
- goals
- defining and managing identities, relationships, and tasks
- practices

At one session, Applegate helped us to weave together three perspectives that I found especially useful in beginning to create the "frame" that I had hoped to discover: (1) the competence work of Spitzberg and Cupbach (1984), particularly conceptualizations relating to the outcomes of self or the other, (2) the conclusion of Clark and Delia (1979)

that "speech communication needs to refocus its attention to consider control over message strategies themselves, but not in isolation from the underlying cognitive and cultural structures through which they are formulated" (187), and (3) Applegate's own approach to competent communication as the creation of a shared reality to help persons understand "what's going on here."

Using these three perspectives, a definition of the communication situation could be conceived of as including for each of the interactants:

- The self
- The other
- Motivation for why we're doing what we're doing (how we decide what to do)
- The setting (what label we give to the event)
- Our relationship
- Tasks we accomplish, both instrumental and goal-directed

This definition can be useful in considering the patterns of interaction, the quality of interaction, and the accomplishment of goals, with respect to self, the other, motivation, setting, relationship, and task accomplishment. The multiple perspectives that define the interpersonal relationship by mediating who the interactants are and what the emergent definition of the situation is also create goals which help interactants to move beyond "who I am" in the interaction to "who I want to be" in the interaction. A social constructionist position on goals is that they are social accomplishments. We later used Barbara O'Keefe's excellent article "The logic of message design: Individual differences in reasoning about communication" (1988) to understand more about this process, noting the creation of "fundamental logics" of communication, including "expressive," "conventional," and "rhetorical" approaches to organize knowledge and construct social realities in the interactions of unique individuals.

We agreed that as interactants come together, the goal is to create a working definition of the situation so that we can coordinate our actions. There are practices, then,

that interactants develop to create these working definitions, including our understanding of our identities, our relationship, our motivations, our tasks, and our norms. Development of these practices creates competence in our communication. Empowerment occurs through reflection, as communicators begin to understand that there are choices--that we can construct who we are in the discourse (O'Keefe, 1988).

Applying the Frame: Application to an Interpersonal Course

I teach a basic course in interpersonal communication which is designed for our majors and minors, as well as for students in other majors who, as I have described it, "wish to explore the dynamics of human interactions, of making meaning of our experiences, and of exploring the influence of context and individual variables on relationships." Course goals suggest that students will:

- explore interpersonal relationships
- examine key variables that influence interpersonal communication
- apply theories and models of interpersonal communication to actual situations

As a result of the Hope College Institute, I decided that my learnings provided the beginnings of a helpful framework for this course. Beginning in the fall, I made two adjustments to the course that, while seemingly small in scope, have had an impact on my students' ability to focus and organize their learning about interpersonal communication.

Our Interaction Framework

Using the knowledge base of this seminar, I now introduce my students to the following "picture" of communication in the interpersonal context: (key variables are italicized):

You and *I*

Interact in a *relationship*

Occurring in a *setting*

To achieve certain *goals*

I begin by using an example with which most of them can identify: A young woman is unhappy because her roommate's boyfriend is always in their room, and she decides that she will initiate a conversation about this problem. We "deconstruct" this example, by:

- identifying the "you" and "I" and how they are continually in a state of co-creation throughout the interaction
- describing the many levels of the "relationship," and how it is constructed by various practices in the interaction
- describing the setting, how it is constructed, and its reciprocal influence in the unfolding of the interaction
- determining the goals that are operating and that might emerge from the interaction

When we are comfortable with this framework, I then introduce communication competence, using Spitzberg and Cupbach's relational competence perspectives of effectiveness and appropriateness (1984). I encourage my students to think about communication competence as assisting us in successful interaction in the framework we have just described.

I now have a framework for the variables, theories and models of which I speak in my course goals. Early in the semester, for example, I ask students to consider, given what quickly has become known as "our framework," why these interpersonal communication topics, for example, are useful:

- Effective use of symbol systems, verbal and nonverbal
- Listening and responsiveness
- Self-awareness
- Conflict management
- Interpersonal persuasion
- Interaction management

The framework provides implicit rationale for the study of these topics. As students understand the "why" suggested by the framework, they are more prepared to connect

concepts as they create an information and experience base about interpersonal communication.

As a result of my having implemented this framework, students appear to have a better appreciation for the idea of communication as a practical discipline. The emphasis on messages seems clearer to maintain, and the social construction of relationships and their competent accomplishment makes sense as students participate in the course. Their vision for the possibilities of communication in their lives seems much more meaningful.

I have used communication journal assignments to begin to assess the results of this approach. Sample assignments include:

- Describe how this week's reading (overview of interpersonal communication and perception) relates to our framework of interpersonal communication: how do you place what you have read in this framework?
- How does this week's reading (topic: assertion) relate to our premises of competent communication?
- Using our premises of competent communication, discuss your competence in listening in the interpersonal communication context. Use your readings about listening to help your analysis.
- How do you use our framework of interpersonal communication to explain interpersonal conflict in your own experiences? Use your reading to help in your analysis.

My Next Steps

This summer, I will be redesigning my interpersonal communication course, and in so doing I hope to use this framework, adding greater depth and breadth to it. I want to explore further connections, for example, between the framework and the transactional nature of communication, between O'Keefe's logics of message design and competent communication, and between Brown and Levinson's concept of Face and how it can be more intentionally woven into this framework.

I also intend to continue my reading in this particular area of interpersonal communication. The knowledge explosion continues to increase, and faculty development experiences such as the Hope Conference help communication teachers make good choices about how to manage this information. Frameworks such as the one I began to consider at the 1992 Hope College Interpersonal Communication Seminar have the potential to increase our understanding and the competence of our practices.

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